

Motivation Factors Influencing L2 Learning Among Military Staff

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Abstract

Language is one of the essential skills for soldiers, particularly in peacekeeping and multilateral operations, as communication skills enhance the effectiveness of operations and foster intercultural understanding. This study investigates motivational drivers of second language (L2) learning by military staff in light of Self-Determination Theory (SDT) and the distinction between instrumental and integrative motivation. Using a mixed-methods approach, the study involved 45 Iranian military learners with quantitative questionnaires, qualitative interviews, and language proficiency tests. Findings suggest instrumental motivation, as stimulated by career advancement and mission success, to be the primary motivator of L2 learning, with intrinsic and integrative motivations as secondary motivators. Issues

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such as limited opportunities for language use, no immersion environments, and a balance between language training and other duties influence the long-term retention of languages. The study stresses that military training programs must incorporate immersion experiences, intrinsic and integrative motivation, and long-term opportunities for language practice. These results contribute to the literature on L2 acquisition in specialized contexts and offer practical recommendations for the enhancement of language training in military settings.

Keywords: military language learning, motivation, Self-Determination Theory, instrumental motivation, integrative motivation, language proficiency, military training programs

1. Introduction

Language skills are usually perceived as a military necessary skill, mainly for multinational and peacekeeping missions. Second language (L2) proficiency improves operational performance, facilitates intercultural communication, and reinforces diplomatic ties. However, L2 acquisition is a multifaceted process with many factors involved, of which motivation is a critical factor. This article reveals motivation factors behind L2 learning among servicemen and women on the basis of theoretical models such as Self-Determination Theory (SDT) and instrumental-integrative motivation difference.

The research questions are as follows:

1. What are the primary L2 learning motivation factors among servicemen and women?
2. How do military-specific goals affect motivation?

3. What are possible challenges of military personnel learning L2 and what are the possible solutions to such challenges?

By probing these questions, this study aims to contribute to a growing literature on L2 learning in expert contexts and provide useful knowledge for military training programs.

2. Literature Review

Theoretical Frameworks

Developed by Deci & Ryan (2000), Self-Determination Theory (SDT) suggests that motivation is on a continuum from amotivation to intrinsic motivation, with extrinsic motivation being in the middle. In L2 learning, intrinsic motivation is the internal pleasure gained from language learning, while extrinsic motivation is motivated by external rewards or pressures. Instrumental motivation, one type of extrinsic motivation, is widely usable in the military context, where mastery of L2 is typically manipulated to professional or mission accomplishment (Dörnyei, 2005).

Self-Determination Theory (SDT), built by Deci and Ryan (2000), offers a firm basis for explaining the motivation for learning second language (L2). According to SDT, motivation is on a continuum, ranging from amotivation—where there is no intention or motivation to do an activity—to intrinsic motivation, where an individual does an activity to enjoy or be content with it. The other end is extrinsic motivation, which is in terms of doing an activity in order for a consequence or reward external to the activity. In a

learning situation of a foreign language, intrinsic motivation can become patented when individuals are motivated internally by the pleasure of learning a foreign language, interest, or social need to interact with other people. Simultaneously, extrinsic motivation can be enhanced by external incentives such as work needs, social prospects, or academic success.

In the military context, the SDT motivation continuum is most directly transferable, since in the military setting, soldiers most frequently possess a multiplicative blend of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation components. Instrumental motivation is one of the extrinsic motivation subtypes and specifically is a key component of pertinence within military settings in which language ability is most frequently linked to career promotion, advancement, or productive mission completion. Instrumental motivation, which is rooted in practical motives such as enhancing operational effectiveness, promotion in rank, or enhancing the ability to perform within multinational operations, has been found to be a significant motivator of military staff L2 learning (Gardger, 2010; Liu & Zhang, 2020). Such motivation will not necessarily generate the same degree of intense pleasure or interest in learning as intrinsic, but it can be an intense and persistent force, especially in high-stakes military environments.

Also, latest studies on L2 learning among military learners state that military learners have both extrinsic and intrinsic motivation and their motivation evolves in line with developments in their life and

what they believe is professional and personal concern. For example, soldiers with initial extrinsic motivation because of achievement in the mission or professional responsibility would eventually achieve intrinsic motivation as a result of experiencing personal gains from learning a new language or cultural affinity among colleagues (Sparks & Ganschow, 2021). This conflict between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation is what makes apparent the richness of linguistic acquisition in military contexts, where the utilitarian value of linguistic proficiency ultimately provides the foundation for producing an authentic, interior feeling of belonging to the language itself. Thus, having an understanding of the rationale behind the motivations of military personnel through the lens of SDT can inform more successful language training programs that take into consideration both the functional and psychological needs of military personnel to facilitate enhanced commitment and learning in foreign languages.

Previous Studies

Previous research on L2 learning in the military environment has highlighted the particular challenges and chances of military personnel. For instance, studies by Smith and Johnson (2019) showed that soldiers have high instrumental motivation levels due to the utilitarian benefits of L2 proficiency in working contexts. Integrative motivation, however, defined as a desire to identify with the target community, is not common among soldiers (Brown, 2020). Research on second language (L2) acquisition in military environments has

uncovered unique challenges and opportunities for military learners, with research indicating varied motivations, strategies, and outcomes. Most of the recent studies focus on elucidating L2 learning motivation, environmental effects such as operational needs, and the effectiveness of various training courses within military environments. These studies are generally classified into three categories: motivation and learning result, training methodology and style, and contextual factors influencing L2 acquisition.

There is a huge literature that speaks to the issue of motivation and language learning in military contexts, particularly distinguishing between extrinsic, instrumental, and intrinsic forms of motivation. For example, Smith and Johnson (2019) found that service members are typically defined by a strong level of instrumental motivation where the general motive for language learning is to use language skills practically towards mission achievement, career advancement, and operational skill. This is corroborated by Brown (2020), who further continues to expound on the omnipresence of instrumental motivation among military foreign language learning, particularly in environments wherein foreign language capability is directly associated with job performance or rank progression. Integrative motivation, or motivation to integrate into the target-language community more on a cultural level, is less common in military members since their motivation is functionally more directed at the use of language than integration into a cultural context.

Intrinsic motivation is also less common in military learners of a language since language learning is thought of as something one needs to do as opposed to an individual interest. Dörnyei (2005) determines that although certain staff become increasingly more intrinsically motivated over time, particularly due to achievement or cultural experience on overseas assignments, most motivation remains in an extrinsic focus. Instrumental motivation has proven to be positively associated with successful L2 acquisition, particularly where the military staff regard learning the language as contributing towards their career aspirations (Gardner, 2010). However, studies show that a more balanced approach, with both intrinsic and extrinsic motivators, could further enhance language learning outcomes in military settings.

Contextual factors are a significant determinant of the success or failure of military language training programs. One such consideration is the operational demands placed on military personnel, as language proficiency is often considered secondary to mission readiness or technical training. As Liu and Zhang (2020) have pointed out, troops in countries like China and Russia tend to prioritize tactical and combat training and view language training as something imposed on them instead of a necessity. This implies that there is not enough time and resources for language training, which reduces those programs as a whole. Besides, language ability is sometimes viewed

as secondary in specialized military forces, such as combat forces, where operational language needs are less frequent.

The other critical contextual factor is the character of international missions and to what extent staff are exposed to multilingual environments. Research has shown that troops who participate in peacekeeping or humanitarian deployments are likely to achieve increased levels of language proficiency, particularly if they serve in multicultural regions where language skills are imperative when interacting with native populations as well as allies (Gass & Varonis, 2018). While such missions provide immersion as well as spontaneous use opportunities for languages, such opportunities tend to be limited to officers or high-ranking troops. Rank-and-file troops, who are more exposed to day-to-day military deployment, may also be deprived of equal access to the language training materials and practice in a real-world setting.

Despite empirical evidence illustrated about the impact of these issues of context, there is an intervening gap between research on solutions to address localization of language training programs to correct them. Limited examination has been devoted to exploring whether and how the military's foreign language training efforts can be suitably customized in various national and cultural contexts, particularly where non-members of premier multinational partnerships like NATO reside. In addition, little study of the effectiveness over time of foreign language instruction initiatives has taken place, in matters of operation efficacy and keeping and sustaining such a skill-

set into the long run. Jodaei et al. (2018) further contributed that language maintenance among Iranian war veterans decreased significantly after their return from foreign missions, and this underlines the need for ongoing language development programs even after deployment.

In spite of the growing number of studies on military language acquisition, there are huge gaps in most areas, most importantly in longitudinal studies and cross-national comparisons. Whereas past studies have only brushed on the issue of training and motivation, there has been less inquiry on the long-term impact of language acquisition on military campaigns and professional growth. Besides, the comparative effectiveness of language training programs among non-NATO countries and rising military powers remains under-explored, with little information on the manner in which these nations apply international blueprints such as STANAG 6001 at the local scale. Subsequent research could also examine the comparative effectiveness of military language training programs from different geopolitical contexts, and how factors like resource allocation, political leanings, and cultural norms influence the effectiveness of language training within military settings. Additionally, further research on the interface between language learning and cultural proficiency in multinational operations could also yield useful information regarding the importance of language to diplomatic and operational success.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The study applies the mixed-methods design, which combines quantitative questionnaires with qualitative interviews to provide a thorough understanding of motivation factors in L2 learning.

3.2 Participants

The study was carried out among 45 Iranian military personnel, including officers and enlisted members. Participants were recruited from an Iranian military academy.

3.3 Data Collection

Data were collected using:

- A 30-question survey measuring motivation types (instrumental, integrative, and intrinsic) on a 5-point Likert scale.
- Semi-structured interviews with 10 participants to discover their experiences and difficulties in L2 learning.
- Language competence tests to measure the L2 abilities of participants.

3.4 Data Analysis

Quantitative data were examined using SPSS, and qualitative data were coded thematically with NVivo software.

4. Findings

4.1 Descriptive Statistics

The survey responses of the 45 participants played a key role in providing substantial information on what motivated forces influenced their L2 learning process. The 30-item survey measured three basic types of motivation, which are instrumental, integrative, and intrinsic motivation, using a 5-point Likert scale. The descriptive statistics hereafter provide the extent to which different motivational forces affected participants' language learning.

Mean scores for each type of motivation were calculated, and based on them, instrumental motivation was the most motivating factor for the participants since it had a mean score of 4.3 out of 5. It suggests that most participants were motivated by the actual, career-related benefits of language learning, including improved communication during multinational military operations and advancement in their career as military officers. Intrinsic motivation came in at second place with an average of 3.8, which shows that there was a moderate level of personal satisfaction derived from learning the language but not primarily from the majority of participants. Integrative motivation, studying the language so as to become a member of the target language group's culture, was the lowest, at 2.6, indicating that there were few participants motivated by the necessity of communicating with the target language group.

The findings presented in Table 1 present a complex interplay of motivation types underlying military personnel's L2 learning. The

highest ranking is for instrumental motivation, with a value of 4.3, reflecting the pragmatic, professional-oriented goals typical of the military context. This is consistent with existing literature (Dörnyei, 2005; Smith & Johnson, 2019), which has consistently emphasized the effectiveness of extrinsic rewards in expert learning settings.

However, the larger table also sheds light on less common but still powerful forms of motivation. For instance, identified regulation (mean = 3.5) and integrated regulation (mean = 3.2) reveal that most soldiers recognize the personal and professional gain of L2 acquisition, even if initially through external pressures. This implies that training programs should emphasize long-term benefits of linguistic proficiency and help learners internalize.

The relatively low integrative motivation score (mean = 2.6) contrasts with findings in civilian contexts, where the desire to identify with the target-language group is more likely to be a dominant factor (Gardner, 1985). This may be a reflection of the unique character of military operations, where pragmatic objectives on the short term take precedence over intercultural identification. Nevertheless, the moderate cultural interest score (mean = 2.9) shows that integrative motivation can be improved further by incorporating cultural factors into language learning.

The external regulation score was high (mean score = 4.1), reflecting the power of institutional pressures in motivating military personnel to learn L2s. While such motivation can be potent in the short term, it will tend to falter to sustain long-term involvement

unless supplemented by more autonomous forms of motivation, like intrinsic or integrated regulation.

Finally, the low amotivation fear score (mean score = 1.8) indicates that most military members perceive L2 learning to be important to their own or career goals. However, the moderate score for fear of failure (mean score = 3.7) indicates the need for motivating learning environments with low anxiety levels and a growth mindset.

Table 1 below presents the mean scores for the three types of motivation:

Motivation Type	Mean Score (1-5)	Description
Instrumental	4.3	High levels of motivation due to practical, career-oriented goals.
Intrinsic	3.8	Moderate motivation from personal satisfaction in learning.
Integrative	2.6	Low motivation related to connecting with the language community.

Identified Regulation	3.5	Motivation driven by personal recognition of the value of L2 learning (e.g., understanding its importance for career growth).
Integrated Regulation	3.2	Motivation aligned with the learner's self-identity and long-term goals (e.g., seeing language skills as part of their professional identity).
External Regulation	4.1	Motivation driven by external rewards or pressures (e.g., mandatory language training, performance evaluations).
Amotivation	1.8	Lack of motivation or feeling that L2 learning is

		irrelevant to personal or professional goals.
Social Responsibility	3.0	Motivation stemming from a sense of duty or responsibility to one's team or mission.
Cultural Interest	2.9	Moderate motivation driven by curiosity or interest in the culture associated with the target language.
Fear of Failure	3.7	Motivation driven by avoiding negative outcomes (e.g., poor performance reviews or mission failure).

4.2 Key Themes from Interview Data

The 10 participants' interviews revealed some common issues about the challenges and determinants of the process of language learning by military personnel. Thematic analysis using NVivo

software identified key themes repeatedly mentioned by interviewees. Those themes emphasized positive determinants that enhanced learning and challenges that prevented further application of the language following training.

1. **Military-Specific Goals:** Dominating in this case was a focus on military-specific goals such as enhanced communication with overseas soldiers while operating or increased professional skill. Interviewees emphasized that English learning was done mainly to make them efficient in multinational operations. Many of them, though, noted that language learning aimed at military-specific terms only and not conversational application, therefore hindering the potential to utilize the language in universal contexts.

2. **Limited International Missions:** The majority of participants complained about not having opportunities to apply their language skills in real situations since international missions were infrequent. This led to underutilization of language skills after training. The majority of interviewees stated that they did not have sufficient opportunities to apply English after completing their training, and this led to language attrition over time. This theme suggests a gap between training expectation and real use in their work.

3. **Outstanding Educators and Organizational Support:** On the contrary, others among the participants applauded the quality of educators and organizational support for learning languages.

Interviewees who received very good-quality teachers and appropriate learning materials registered higher levels of participation and performance in learning. However, others among the interviewees noted that these were generally reserved for the ranking officers at the expense of the enlisted officers fewer opportunities for quality language learning.

4. Inability to Use Language after the Course: Another dominant theme that came forth was the inability to use the language after completion of the course. The majority of the participants lamented that, even though they had gained a very high level of competence throughout the course, they could not practice or implement their language skills in their day-to-day military activities. Therefore, they said that their language skills receded with the passage of time.

5. Organizational Support: Many of the respondents highlighted the need for organizational support in encouraging language learning. Several of the interviewees suggested that although language training was theoretically encouraged, in practice the use of language skills was not necessarily endorsed by the military command, particularly if the resources were being spent elsewhere. This was glaringly apparent in junior personnel who did not have any professional or operational need to use the language.

6. Insufficient Access to Immersive Learning Environments: Participants frequently cited the insufficiency of access to immersive

learning environments as a key issue. These are essential in supporting the reinforcement of language skills. Most of the military members indicated that learning was solely limited to classroom instruction, which was inadequate for acquiring fluent real-life communication skills. Lack of interaction with native speakers or exposure to areas where English was spoken limited the degree to which they could enhance and sustain their proficiency.

7. Balancing Language Training with Other Duties: A key constraint that was noted was the difficulty in balancing language training with other military duties. The majority of the participants indicated that their busy timetables, which included operations and tactical activities, left them with little opportunity to learn a language. Time constraints and other military competencies taking priority over language training meant that learning a language was always secondary to primary military training, which made it impossible for them to provide priority to language learning.

Table 2 summarizes the key themes identified from the interviews:

Key Theme	Frequency	Description
Military-Specific Goals	High	Focus on language learning

		for operational and career purposes.
Few	High	Limited
International Missions		opportunities to use language skills in real-world settings.
Great Teachers and Organizational Support	Moderate	Positive impact of skilled instructors and institutional backing.
Not Using Language After the Course	High	Decline in language proficiency due to lack of use post-training.
Organizational Support	Moderate	Insufficient practical application of language skills despite organizational promotion.
Lack of Access to Immersive Learning Environments	High	Limited exposure to real-world, immersive

		language experiences.
Difficulty	High	Time
Balancing Language		constraints and other
Training with Other		military responsibi
Duties		

Language Competence After Course and Challenges

The study also tested participants' English language proficiency both before and after the course by means of language proficiency tests. There was a high increase regarding language skill, particularly in reading and writing. Oral skills only showed a modest level of increase, which agrees with the qualitative report of the interview. Participants also stated that, even if they did not have any trouble understanding technical military terms expressed through the English language, they found it hard to use verbal speech spontaneously, particularly in less formalized, non-operation settings.

Despite the popularity of the initial language courses, the majority of participants reported language attrition occurring quickly after training completion. That means that when there was no regular exposure and real use of the language gained during training, the language acquired was not kept. Lack of international missions and limited opportunities for regular use of English in armed forces operations were cited as important reasons for such loss of English proficiency.

5. Discussion and conclusion

The findings point to the relevance of instrumental motivation for military L2 learning, consonant with SDT's emphasis on extrinsic motivation. However, the relatively low levels of integrative motivation point towards a need for interventions to foster higher identification with the target language group. Military training programs should incorporate engaging activities, i.e., language practice with native speakers, to foster integrative motivation. This study indicates the complex dynamics of motivation forces in L2 acquisition among military personnel. Instrumental motivation dominates, but developing intrinsic and integrative motivation will result in longer-term language maintenance and intercultural competence. Policymakers and educators must give priority to flexible training programs dealing with the special concerns of military personnel.

The findings of this study identify instrumental motivation as the most prevalent factor driving L2 acquisition among soldiers, with intrinsic and integrative motivation playing secondary but nonetheless significant roles. These findings are aligned with Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), which theorizes that extrinsic rewards such as career advancement or mission success can effectively drive learners. However, the relatively low levels of integrative motivation

suggest a potential deficiency in building intercultural competence, which is more applicable to multinational military operations (Dornyei, 2005).

Unlike previous studies, e.g., Smith and Johnson (2019), this research provides a more advanced understanding of the interaction between motivation factors and army-specific goals. Even where instrumental motivation is the strongest, intrinsic motivation suggests that there is potential for military learners to enjoy learning an L2 on an individual basis. This implies a reconsideration of the argument that only extrinsic rewards can encourage military learners (Gardner, 1985). The findings are also in line with research in the occupational language learning literature (MacIntyre & Gregersen, 2012), which also highlight the combined role of self-regulation and contextual support in promoting long-term motivation.

Their potential contribution to military training programs is considerable. Incorporating adaptive, task-based learning modules targeted to military-specific goals might enhance motivation and performance (Ellis, 2003). Additionally, experiential learning such as language practice with locals or participation in international combined exercises might facilitate integrative motivation and intercultural competence (Krashen, 1982). Policy-makers also need to invest more in language training because it is a strategic resource for mission success and global security (Graddol, 2006). Given that language attrition is such a common problem, integrating routine refresher training and continuous exposure opportunities into models

of military career development may ensure that skills do not erode (Bialystok, 2001).

This study has several limitations in spite of its contribution. The sample included only military personnel from given regions and might influence the overall generalizability of the results. The self-reported measures of motivation can also be biased, as the respondents might overestimate their own motivational factors or misinterpret the ones given (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011). Such research may overcome the foregoing limitations through researching the effects of immersive language instruction on skill mastery and motivation, as well as longitudinal designs examining the fluctuation in motivation within the scope of a soldier's career. Finally, mixed-method designs utilizing observation and experiment could further elucidate the motives involved in language learning in military settings (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006).

In conclusion, the study highlights the complex dynamic of motivation factors in L2 acquisition among military personnel. Instrumental motivation is the most dominant, but the cultivation of intrinsic and integrative motivation would enhance language retention in the long term and intercultural knowledge. With the increasingly complex world security environment, the ability of military personnel to communicate across cultural and linguistic boundaries will remain a precious asset. More research should be conducted in the future to further examine the role of pedagogical intervention, environmental

support, and psychological resilience in enhancing language learning and memory in military contexts (VanPatten & Williams, 2015).

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